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ABSTRACT

A study examined the dynamics present in middle-level schools to identify the issues of concern to parents, teachers, and the greater school community. It also attempted to identify those strategies used successfully by school leaders in response to those concerns. Four middle schools in different areas of the United States participated. The modified case-study approach included 1,900 surveys, 400 individual and small-group interviews, and 325 exit interviews with parents who were transferring their children from the public middle school to a private alternative for nonreligious reasons. Sources of information were charted and coded to identify topics, to organize topics into patterns, and to develop conclusions based on the patterns. Strategies used by principals to successfully work with parents and the community were identified. The results, while different in each community, reflected several themes. The importance of collaborative work, the centrality of student success and achievement in schooling, and the need for regular and ongoing review of school programs were essential to school leadership trying to determine how to strengthen middle-school programs. A commitment to involving parents and other community groups proved central to the success of these reviews. (Contains 41 references.) (RKJ)

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## CONFRONTING MIDDLE SCHOOL'S MOST CONTENTIOUS ISSUES: Lessons in School Leadership

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One of the most prevalent educational reforms of the past thirty years was adoption of a middle school model (McEwin, Dickinson & Jenkins, 1996). Across the nation it became the predominant grade configuration and educational model for students in grades six through eight.

Despite its prevalence, middle level schools provoke passionate feelings--both positive and negative. For some, middle schools set the standard for educational reform--responding to student needs and focused on strengthening curricular and instructional practice. Others believe middle level schools represent what's wrong with American education--over emphasis on social and emotional issues and a lowering of academic standards (Beane, 1999).

Many schools initiated reforms based on recommendations by national organizations (Carnegie Council, 1989; National Middle School Association, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985). Despite the growing adoption of the recommendations (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996), and the evidence that the suggestions positively impact students (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993), parents and others continue to raise concerns about middle level schools (Beane, 1999; DeYoung, Howley & Theobald, 1995; Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Saks, 1999).

Cuban (1992) described the community relations need this way.

As long as schools have all the trademarks of what the public expects in a school, they are 'real schools.' If the public loses confidence in the district's capacity to produce real schools displaying familiar features, rules and classifications, political support and funding shrink swiftly (p. 248).

This presents a significant challenge for proponents of the middle level school. After thirty years there is no agreement about the impact of the middle level movement. Schools have established teams, altered schedules, adjusted grouping practices and modified curriculum. Still, questions remain about the middle school model and its effect on student learning.

### The Study

To better understand the dynamics present in middle level schools a study was begun to identify the issues of concern to parents, teachers and the greater school community and to also identify those strategies used successfully by school leaders in response to those concerns. Four community studies were conducted to gather data from teachers, parents, and the general public about their middle level schools. The results of these studies were instructive for school leaders who wished to build strong community support for their middle level school. By clustering the responses, questions, complaints, and accolades into manageable categories, these studies provided a framework for understanding how schools build or erode community confidence.

The focus of these studies was on identification of those issues of greatest concern to stakeholders in middle schools in the four communities. The purpose was to uncover those issues which provoked the greatest concern and stimulated the greatest debate. The issues which emerged were frequently contentious and provoked passionate responses from the constituents.

One interpretation of the study would be that constituents were highly critical of the schools. That was not uniformly the case. This investigation revealed that these middle schools do many things well. For the most part, parents and others were strongly committed to the success of their schools. The conversations which identified these concerns reflected a commitment to school improvement, and a willingness to work together to refine and strengthen their schools.

## Methodology and Data Analysis

Four communities participated in this study. Located in different geographic areas of the United States (mid-Atlantic, midwest, northeast) and reflecting diverse demographics, they brought varying levels of support and resource to their programs. This study was designed to identify concerns about middle level schools and examine leadership strategies. No attempt was made to examine the data based on the demographic differences present in the schools.

This investigation utilized a modified case study approach (Stake, 1995). After identifying critical stakeholders in the schools, data were collected in three ways: surveys, individual and small group interviews, and exit interviews with parents removing their children from the public middle school for a private alternative for non-religious issues. During the study nearly 400 parents and other community members were interviewed individually or in small groups; 1,900 parent and community members were surveyed; and 325 parents participated in exit interviews.

A primary source of data were interviews conducted with small groups of parents, teacher and students. An open-ended format was selected (Spradley, 1979) because it afforded the researchers an opportunity for greater interaction with the participants and allowed the participants to participate spontaneously and with great energy.

Written notes of each interview were prepared. This created a document of each interview that could be later reviewed and analyzed for key words and ideas.

In such interviews the role of the participant often changes to that of "informant" (Yin, 1994). Such informants are critical to the success of case study research. Yin suggested that informants not only provide their own insights into the investigation but provide the researcher with suggestions for additional ways to gather the data.

The interviews served yet another function. They provided an opportunity for the researchers to corroborate certain facts which emerged from other documentation (e.g., surveys, school artifacts). The interviews allowed the

researchers to probe the written responses and to elicit information from the respondents regarding both the concerns and responses to those concerns.

An ongoing data analysis process was utilized for this study (Eisner, 1991; Yin 1994). Information was arranged in files for each school and each principal (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Sources of information were charted and coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Charles' (1995) four steps were utilized to identify topics, cluster topics into categories, form categories into patterns, and develop conclusions based on the patterns.

Survey results were analyzed to identified patterns of responses and revealed major themes. Interview data were then examined, using key word and trend analyses. The themes were confirmed and the interviews provided explicit details and examples to illustrate each of the themes and school responses.

The study also examined strategies used by principals to respond to the concerns. It focused primarily on process responses, those strategies employed to build and sustain parent and community support for the schools. By examining these responses other approaches were not minimized. The emphasis, however, was on identification of those strategies which addressed the concerns and built capacity for ongoing dialogue about the middle level program.

This study, while focused on middle level schools, identified strategies used by principals to successfully work with parents and community to address some of the persistent and potentially contentious issues in public education. The work of these principals can inform and enlighten the work of school leaders at any level.

### The Communities

Data for this study were gathered in four communities located in different parts of the eastern United States. In order to assure anonymity the names of each has been changed.

Greenlawn is an affluent suburb of a major Northeastern city. Recently the schools grappled with increasing diversity brought about by population shifts from a nearby urban area. Housing patterns leave the community divided---more affluent and largely white on one side of town and a more economically diverse group on the other.

Eastboro, also located in the Northeast, is an older suburb of a major city. Recent population changes resulted in nearly 40 percent of students being minority. Traditionally serving a homogeneous population, the schools now serve students more representative of an urban environment.

Middleboro is a suburban of a metropolitan area in the mid-Atlantic region. It is on the outer reaches of the metropolitan area and contains a sizable rural constituency. Quite stable over time, the schools have recently experienced some growth and a shift in the employment base. The recent election of more conservative members to the Board of Education led to a reexamination of its middle school program.

The fourth community is University City, a midwestern community of about 100,000. Home to a major university, the community is diverse---25% minority--and has a reputation for being high achieving and strongly committed to its schools.

### What Are the Issues?

Concerns about the middle level school reflected seven themes. Several related to organizational and structural issues but many reflected a concern with curricular and instructional practices which were often not well understood by constituent groups or were presented as conforming to a vague philosophy about middle schools (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). These concerns offered insights into some of the more contentious and provocative issues facing middle level schools.

The seven themes included:

Anonymity - School size was an important issue. It accounted for a pervasive sense of anonymity prevalent in parent encounters with schools.

Parents often felt no one knew their child well, that their children were in danger of "falling through the cracks," and that given the workload of teachers there was little likelihood that the school could pay much attention to their child.

Curriculum - Curriculum appeared as a maze of unconnected activities to many parents. They often described attempts at "interdisciplinary stuff" but were confused and bewildered by the units and their relevance to individual content areas. Parents were confounded by the apparent disparity in focus from class to class--was it skill acquisition or high school preparation? They reported that even middle school staff could not distinguish the real purpose of the middle level curriculum.

Rigor and Challenge - Based on their experiences with the curriculum parents expressed serious concern about the perceived lack of rigor in the middle school program. They were particularly concerned with what they described as "trivial assignments"--worksheet after worksheet after worksheet. Compounding their concern was the belief that school personnel equated rigor with the amount of homework not the quality of assignments. Parents also raised serious questions about the idiosyncratic nature of student performance standards--standards which appeared to vary from teacher to teacher, team to team.

Safety, Sociability and Civility - The vast majority of parents (90%) felt that their children were safe at school, but had concerns about some aspects of student behavior. They believed that adults permitted students to be "too unruly" and tolerated too much rudeness and incivility. Many parents believed appropriate standards of behavior were neither modeled nor monitored by adults in the school.

Responsiveness - One issue permeating most parent responses was the belief that schools were unresponsive to their requests and inquiries. While responsiveness was defined differently, it did not mean acquiesce to their requests. For most parents it meant adopting a proactive stance to help their children without waiting for the parent to demand assistance.



Instruction - Parents believed that their children received "high quality instruction" but they were concerned that it was often "dull and boring." Parents complained that instruction consisted too often of teacher lecture, student seat work, and paper and pencil testing. The lack of technology use and integration was also a concern.

Parent and Public Relations - A common concern for parents was the lack of strategies for dealing with routine problems. They often reported an absence of clarity about whom to call, or how to get information. This was compounded by their interaction with more teachers than in the elementary setting. Inconsistent communication regarding school programs was mentioned frequently. Parents received mixed messages from school personnel, often from elementary and high school teachers who had little information about the program but whose criticisms greatly influenced parent perception of the middle level school.

### The Leadership Response

In addition to identifying concerns about middle level schools the researchers investigated the ways in which school principals responded to concern about their program. Interest in the leadership response was important because the role of principal has emerged as one of the most critical elements contributing to the success of school reform (Lambert, 1998; Schwann & Spady, 1998; Speck, 1995).

The importance of leadership is a theme which permeates the literature on school reform. A report on a major middle school reform initiative (Lewis, 1993) described the progress of five urban school districts. It found that "where systematic change is most visible, good leadership ripples through the system" (p. 111).

Regardless of the school setting, two principles underlay the principals work (1) the value of working collaboratively with stakeholders (Lambert, 1998; Speck, 1995); and (2) the importance of incorporating constructivist approaches to the development of solutions (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Lambert et. al., 1996; Mohr, 1998; Wagner, 1998).

The implications of these two principles were profound. Recognizing that reform is most successful where the principal is a forceful and highly visible advocate the principals in this study were articulate advocates of school reform. These leaders, however, were committed to working with faculty and parents to examine their school's program, identify concerns and collaboratively construct solutions.

Important lessons emerged from this project. They reflect the continuing metamorphosis of leadership from a focus on management to a focus on learning, from didactic to interactive, and from directive to collaborative. These lessons offer helpful insights for school leaders confronting similarly difficult and contentious issues.

#### The Foundation: Work with Stakeholders

Underlying nearly all of the concerns cited in this study was a lack of agreement among parents and school personnel about the role and function of the middle level school. The mission was often described in startlingly different terms---prepare students for the rigor of high school, help them through a difficult developmental time, support and nurture them so they can make it through "these years," or serve as a holding tank until they get to high school.

The absence of agreement about the function and purpose of the school had a dramatic impact on the efforts of these leaders to strengthen their school's program. Lacking agreement, each constituent group formed their own judgments based on their unique experiences. Teachers formed judgments based on their training, their interaction with parents, or what principals told them. Parents based their beliefs on the experience of their children---their teachers, their classwork, and their treatment at school. The result was often beliefs formed by limited or incomplete information. Rarely was the process the result of engaging and interactive conversation.

Schools in this study responded to the lack of agreement in several ways. Perhaps the most visible was to initiate an on-going conversation with parents and others about the school and its programs. Often, a representative group of

teachers and parents convened to review and examine the schools mission and its relationship to school programs. One principal described the process, "It was essential that we talk about the issues. Continuing to harbor these misperceptions would not improve the school. It would be divisive. So, we began a very public review of our program."

Initiating such a review modeled a process useful in addressing a variety of school issues. Examination of core beliefs was most successful when it assured that divergent points-of-view, even those challenging current practice, were examined and explored (Williamson & Johnston, 1991). Those reviews proceeded with no pre-conceived notion of the outcomes. Only by grappling with the difficult and often fractious issues--facing the conflict and working for solutions--were schools able to assure that contentious problems were addressed and support built among parent and community groups. The goal of such efforts was to develop a set of beliefs which aligned themselves with the needs of students in the local community, rather than alignment with a fixed and immutable program structure.

The review often lead to a statement of beliefs which represented a consensus of the school's teachers, administration, parents, and other appropriate personnel. It was imperative that the group include all points-of-view, and give serious attention to the ultimate purpose: to shape policy and practices in the middle school.

A second common response was to engage constituent groups in collaborative planning activities. The relationship of individual involvement in change with personal ownership of the change effort surfaces repeatedly (Clark & Clark, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Oakes, et. al., 1993; Williamson & Johnston, 1991). By involving faculty, students, parents and community in planning and decision-making the administrator can "develop a feeling of program ownership among all of the participants" (Clark & Clark, 1994, p. 51).

A survey of administrators regarding strategies for maintaining their middle level programs cited participation in decision making as the most important factor (George & Anderson, 1989). "Widespread involvement in the policy-

making and decision-making that occurs prior to the opening of the new school and in the years to follow" (p. 68) was cited as essential to the success of the middle level school. Erickson identified the selection, nurturing, training, persuading, and convincing of planning team members as the critical element. "Then, team members will become the crucial element in transforming [the] school" (1993, p. 30).

The importance of working with all constituent groups was an essential element of these studies. Obvious stakeholders included teachers, parents and students. However, other groups such as senior citizens, business leaders, citizens without children in the schools, religious leaders, and union officials played a significant role in these initiatives. Their participation acknowledged the important role of constituent groups not traditionally involved in planning. Such groups influenced how a school and its program was viewed in the larger community

Implementation of middle level practices requires a thoughtful process of information gathering, analysis and inquiry. Creating "communities of inquiry" (Oakes, et. al., 1993, p. 476) demands that the locus of change be at the school and that school constituents be provided with the resources, time and opportunity, to think critically about proposed changes. It is through this process of critical inquiry that constituent groups come to see alternative practices as appropriate (Fullan, 1993). "Only unbridled inquiry into these practices can sustain both the focus of the school's general reform and the specific innovation in question" (Oakes, et. al., 1993, p. 476).

In response to growing concern about the middle school's purpose and function leaders in Middleboro established a steering committee to examine its program. Committee members included teachers and parents from the middle school but also involved elementary and high school representatives. A local senior center selected a representative along with a local business group. The intent was to maximize involvement and to reflect a variety of points-of-view. Each group was asked to select representatives who would be "good group

members---open-minded, willing to listen, and committed to working with others."

These characteristics proved prophetic. As the group launched its work it was immediately evident that some members held firm, intransigent points-of-view. However, while steadfast in their beliefs, they enthusiastically worked with other members, asked probing questions, and sought clarification and understanding. It was essential that members were able to work with one another--to listen, to debate, but also seek agreement. It was equally important that a variety of views and perspectives be represented. As the Assistant Superintendent remarked: "We'll hear from all of them eventually. It's better to include them in the process at the outset and search for a way to address their concerns."

Another strategy adopted by the four locales was to commission a community study of the middle school program. In each instance outside facilitators used a variety of techniques to elicit beliefs and perceptions regarding program effectiveness. For example, in Eastboro parents, teachers and students completed a detailed survey about their middle schools. These data were complemented by a series of focus group interviews. The interviews allowed small groups to interact with the facilitators and discuss in some detail their beliefs about the school's program.

The community studies served as one tool to engage constituent groups in examination of their school's program. They further provided a base of data and other information on which to ground subsequent program modifications. Listening intently to their constituents, welcoming honest feedback, and validating people's beliefs was an important step toward starting a conversation with the community.

Each of the communities included in the study found that working with constituent groups was an effective response to the concerns. A key initial step was starting a conversation--establishing some mechanism for hearing the concerns, talking about the issues, and collaboratively seeking solutions.

### Lesson 1: Focus Initially on Relationships

Study groups, such as those established in these four communities, often struggle with their work. Participants frequently possess strongly held points-of-view and start their work convinced that others see the issues just as they do and will quickly come to appreciate their perspective (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

When this outcome is not achieved, participants often become frustrated and convinced that there is something wrong with either the process or the leadership of the group. They want quick resolution to difficult topics and tire of the debate and disagreement.

Rather than merely participate in the activities it was essential that participants became invested in each other's learning and in the success of the process. Explicit steps were taken to create such a climate.

Common characteristics described the work in each community. Initial meetings were occasionally tenuous. Skepticism about what to expect, resulted in discussions that consisted primarily of learning about school programs and justifying current practice. Participants grappled with questions such as: How much do you reveal about yourself and your school to strangers? How comfortable are you talking about contentious issues?

For many, the initial conversations were guarded, showcased sound practices and encompassed only "safe" topics. They failed to generate discussion about the persistent barriers to school reform or to highlight areas of disagreement. Those first discussions, while guarded, were important. They contributed to the creation of a safe, caring environment, one which supported and nurtured the more difficult discussions.

Subsequent activities were quite different. As participants invested in the discussion, and established friendships with their colleagues, they warmed to the dialogue. They talked about barriers to reform present in their schools and eagerly sought advice from their colleagues. Participants asked tough questions yet remained supportive and encouraging (Garmston, 1998).

## Lesson 2: Welcome A Variety of Points-of-View

The purpose of this study was to uncover those areas where there was disagreement about middle level schools. In each community a range of perspectives about the middle level program emerged---some supportive, some neutral, some critical. While not surprising, what was immediately apparent was the passion driving the beliefs of both supporters and critics.

Resistance to change and disagreement about the impact of school programs is common (Janas, 1998). Any effort at restructuring prompts dissent, dissent usually based on the feelings and beliefs of stakeholders (Johnston & Johnston, 1993). It is rarely based on information or data (Williamson & Johnston, 1991). One of the hallmarks of this study was the degree to which school leaders recognized that understanding and working with dissent was essential to the success of their improvement efforts. In this and other studies leaders have demonstrated that permitting a group to clarify feelings allows dissenters to work through their concerns and contributes to the long-term health and vitality of the group (Williamson & Johnston, 1991)

Ignoring dissent was counterproductive. It simply provided another reason for the dissenters to remain discontented. One alternative found in these four cases was to treat dissent as a rational, legitimate part of the planning process (Williamson & Johnston, 1991). "Open communities of inquiry require constructive conflict" explained Oakes (1993, p. 477). Senge (1990) encouraged identification of opposing values which form strategic dilemmas. "The admission that dilemmas even exist tends to be difficult" (p. 18). Identifying the issues, engaging in open dialogue regarding the possibilities, seeking common ground, and making informed choices emerged as an effective planning tool.

Uncontrolled conflict, on the other hand, makes change more difficult. To manage conflict in these four settings the leaders expected, even encouraged dissent. In each case it proved helpful in clarifying thinking, in delineating alternative approaches, in forming recommendations, and in reaching



consensus on new organizational norms (Janas, 1998; Oakes, et. al., 1993; Williamson & Johnston, 1991).

The work of a group in Middleboro illustrated the complexity of this issue. Following election of a conservative slate to the Board of Education, a review of the middle school program ensued. A study group was formed, comprised of major stakeholder groups---teachers, parents, administrators, community members, union officials.

At one of the initial meetings several teachers and union representatives became distraught at the comments of a community member. Their response was to demand an apology and threaten to walk-out. One member played the "trump" card, "Remember nothing will happen until it's negotiated."

Rather than react to these threats, the facilitator engaged the group in a discussion of helpful group processes. In "role alike" groups and then in "mixed role" groups several issues were discussed. The topics included identification of resources need for "quality" group work, ways to respond to disagreement, and indicators needed to believe the group's work had been successful.

As a result of these small group discussions the task force began a conversation about needs: to be listened to, to feel respected and affirmed, to be invited to offer their point-of-view, and to be open to many different alternatives. Sensitivity to the tension which permeated this group's work was important. "Clearing the air" in a non-threatening and constructive way allowed the group to continue and lead to much more productive work.

### Lesson 3: Create a Common Base of Information

Those who work in schools speak a different language from parents and other constituent groups. Use of specialized and technical language along with differential access to information frequently emerge as significant barriers to collaborative work (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Each of these communities launched a review of their middle school program based in part on dissatisfaction from parents and the larger community. It became readily apparent that in addition to lacking agreement on the function



and purpose of the school there was also no agreement about the indicators used to measure school effectiveness. Was it achievement data? high school success? parent and student satisfaction?

Use of data and information is most often associated with the evaluation of programs. It is also critical when working to refine and strengthen a program. George and Anderson (1989) made the case for evaluation this way. "The most effective evaluation efforts appear to begin a year or more prior to implementation when planners, having determined what they hope to accomplish, begin gathering data they can use to compare with post-implementation outcomes" (p. 71).

The dilemma which emerged in these communities was that there was no agreement among constituents regarding the data to be collected and studied. This was not unusual. Lewis (1993) found that among urban middle level schools, "staff did not know how to collect and analyze data about how the school was doing" (p. 40).

The use of data for more than evaluation purposes emerged as a critical element of these community initiatives. The ability to define indicators of student success, to gather the information, to analyze it in relation to many other factors, and to report the results became an important tool.

Struggling to agree on a common base of information served an important purpose. It complemented the discussion of beliefs, and emerged as a tangible manifestation of those beliefs. In University City, for example, one articulated belief was "high achievement for all students." This led naturally to collection and examination of achievement data disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors. The results were alarming to the group. While overall achievement was solid, it became clear that groups of students were not achieving at comparable levels. An action agenda emerged.

Gathering the information was but the first stage. Use of the data for decision-making and for ongoing refinement of program initiatives was equally important. Erickson (1993) stressed the importance of continually monitoring the progress of restructuring a middle level school. "Establish a means to

collect data on the process to determine the success or failure of restructuring" (p. 32) she advised. This was critical to the success of the four communities in this study.

During a review of the middle school program in Eastboro disagreement arose about the success of the current program. Teachers and administrators shared their belief that the program served students well. One remarked, "the only problem is the kids are different, they don't respond the same way. If only they would take things more seriously." A community advocate spoke up and said, "That's the point. The kids are not the same. That's why we've got to look at the program and make some changes."

On that auspicious note a task force began to examine the current status of middle schools in Eastboro. They asked for and received lots of information--- annual reports, curriculum studies, achievement data, and attendance information along with other things. The group quickly discovered that while they had ample information there was no agreement about which items constituted evidence about the program's success.

Through the help of a facilitator the group talked about and reached agreement on a set of indicators to measure the success of the program. While not unique, the indicators were necessary for the group's subsequent work. The discussion forced examination of core beliefs, on purposes of the middle school program, and provided an opportunity for each group to gain greater appreciation and insight into the perspectives of one another.

#### Lesson 4: Be Attentive to Process

Success in confronting difficult issues may be attributed to several factors but one of the most critical was attention to process. Garmston (1998) found that "part of our difficulty with conflict is how we talk about it" (p. 56). Principals were attentive to devoting time and energy at the outset of the examination to reaching agreement on the ways in which the study groups would work. As one principal remarked, "The meetings were more than sharing information and meeting with colleagues. They were about discussion of difficult and tough

issues. This required sensitivity to the ways in which we were going to work with one another.”

Meetings were most successful when process issues were agreed upon. For example, a group in University City committed to “active listening, thoughtful questioning, and maintaining a focus on the activity rather than the person.” They grew to value the raising of difficult questions, probing for underlying assumptions, and suggestion of alternatives. Comfort with challenging the thinking of other group members along with valuing diverse perspectives strengthened their work.

This group’s comfort did not emerge naturally. At the first meeting the group worked with an outside facilitator to learn about diverse working styles. They used a common assessment to determine their own styles and then spent several hours talking about different needs for information, debate, and closure. One participant said, “At first I thought, what a waste of time. Let’s get to work on the issues. But the activity transformed the group. We got to know one another and to appreciate our different working styles.”

Another important lesson from the work in these four communities was the need to be clear about process issues from the outset. When dealing with complex issues, ones which provoke passionate feelings, it is critical that norms about how the group will work and make decisions be established (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Such a process was used by the middle level school in Middleboro. In response to growing concern about the middle schools a task force of parents, teachers, administrators and community members was assembled. Their task was to assess the current program in light of current needs, and make recommendations for change.

The district provided the task force with a description of its task and asked for recommendations at the conclusion of the group’s work, approximately eighteen months later. A regular meeting schedule was established. A division among group members emerged quickly. One group was comprised of those involved in an earlier program review, one which designed the current

program. The other group, primarily parents and community members, was concerned that the program was no longer focused on student needs.

Discussion was intense, often heated. Members were passionate about their beliefs but equally committed to understanding others' point-of-view and creating a vision statement built on shared beliefs.

A facilitator helped the group agree on a set of norms for their work. The facilitator was critical. Distrust was pervasive. Only an "outsider" was viewed as neutral and capable of providing an "equal hearing" for all parties.

Equally important as the facilitation was development of a set of operating principles to guide the groups work. The principles focused on organizational issues (e.g., agendas, minutes, length of meetings), decision-making procedures (e.g., proposals not voted on at meeting when introduced, preference for consensus), and relationships (e.g., work groups comprised of representatives of all stakeholder groups).

The Middleboro group illustrated an important lesson from this investigation. Being attentive to important process questions was critical to the success of work groups. Clearly articulated standards for decision-making, information gathering and sharing, and other operating practices provided a model for deliberations about more substantive topics. Such a framework assured participants that they would be heard and that no one group would have greater sway over the outcome.

#### Lesson 5: There's More than One Solution

Schools are being asked to assume greater responsibility for the success of their programs. As the public demands greater accountability they also expect increased participation in school decision-making (David, 1996).

Parents in this study shared stories about their interaction with schools. One parent described her interaction with a principal in Eastboro. While her daughter was in seventh grade she visited the school to talk with the principal about what she believed to be a lack of academic focus in several of her daughter's classes. She was especially concerned about the emphasis on

worksheets, group projects and esteem building activities. The parent explained that her daughter's experience was quite different from that of her son who had other teachers. The principal invited the parent into her office, closed the door, and told the parent about how the school was struggling to implement the "middle school model." "Some teachers know what a 'real' middle school is all about. You're fortunate that your daughter has those teachers," explained the principal. The parent was astounded by the response. "I thought school was about achievement, about learning, not about some vague set of principles. The whole conversation left me dismayed and confused," she explained.

Embracing greater accountability for their programs characterized the middle level schools in these four communities. This led naturally to a commitment to work jointly with parents and community to develop standards for their school's success, to examine both the positive and negative achievements of their school, and to construct their own solutions to difficult issues.

The efforts of the middle schools in University City provided a model. Concern arose regarding the way middle schools served able students, those most gifted and talented. Rather than engage in a debate about the correctness of that perception, the district convened a task force of parents, teachers, administrators and specialists in gifted and talented education to gather data and make recommendations about the program.

As might be expected, many different perspectives were evident. Some insisted on a pull-out program for the most talented. Others argued for an inclusive program with differentiated instruction.

Over a two-year period the study group agreed upon a statement of beliefs about the education of "able" students. It articulated a set of descriptors for an educational program that conformed to those beliefs, and it prepared a set of recommendations for strengthening the middle school program.

At the conclusion of their project one member, the president of a student advocacy group, summarized the process.

I never thought it would happen. When we started, I spent my time counting votes to see if we could prevail. By not resorting to votes and by spending

time listening and learning we discovered that we could accomplish more by seeking common ground. I didn't like some of these people in the beginning. Now they're friends.

An important outcome of the group's work was realization that every member, regardless of point-of-view, was interested in more effectively serving students. Recognizing that people of good will often disagree resulted in an appreciation that the group would accomplish more by working together, rather than alone.

The district's willingness to work with parents and others to study the difficult topic of gifted and talented education contributed to the success. Recognizing that good results can come from healthy debate was an important realization. At the conclusion of the project there was public discussion of the recommendations. Rather than defending and rationalizing their program's effectiveness, citing the literature and research, this district saw parent concerns as an opportunity to work collaboratively--to construct a local solution to a contentious and divisive issue.

### Conclusion

The tension around core beliefs about middle schools experienced by these four communities is not unusual. What was unusual was the commitment by the leaders in these districts to confronting the issues, to launching tough conversations about difficult issues, and to openly acknowledging the disagreement about their schools.

The results, while different in each district, reflected several themes about contemporary school leadership---the importance of collaborative work, the centrality of student success and achievement in schooling, and the need for regular and on-going review of school programs. They recognized the power that can emerge from engaging those most impacted by the school's program in assessing its effect and designing ways to strengthen its service.

A commitment to involving parents and other community groups in examining school effectiveness proved central to the success of these reviews.

Ignoring the concerns would have resulted in greater mistrust and dissent. Participants were regularly surprised at the agreements which emerged from these discussions. One teacher remarked, "I never thought we would agree on anything, but we were really focused on the same things. We just needed time to share our ideas, to listen, and to understand one another." A Middleboro parent articulated a common outcome,

We started out as strangers, but emerged as friends. We agreed on many things, continue to disagree on some, but have a better understanding of each other. I know everyone wants to do what's best. I hope we can continue to meet and talk.

Continuing the conversation, striving for better understanding, and seeking agreement characterized these studies. Confronting contentious issues proved to be all about creating a way for people to talk with one another, to work on shared tasks, and to build relationships and shared commitment.

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